DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 341 736 TM 017 932

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TITLE Translation between Symbolic Representations: Relationship between Instruction and Performance.

INSTITUTION Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing, Los Angeles, CA.

SPONS AGENCY National Science Foundation, Washington, D.C.; Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO CSE-TR-329
PUB DATE Feb 90
NOTE 24p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Algebra; Black Students; High Schools; *High School Students; Hispanic Americans; *Interpretive Skills; Mathematical Applications; Mathematics Materials; *Performance; *Problem Solving; Secondary School Teachers; *Symbols (Mathematics); *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Symbolic Representation

ABSTRACT

Students' performances on mathematical problems varying in symbolic form and the kinds of symbolic representations and translation used in instruction were explored. The sample consisted of 29 students enrolled in Algebra II in a summer program for minority students. All students were Black or Hispanic American and most were about to enter grade 11. For two topic areas--solving simultaneous equations in two unknowns and distance-rate-time relationships--sets of problems were developed that varied the symbolic form of the problem as given and of the response required. Materials that teachers used, student notes, and interviews with the teacher determined the symbolic forms used in instruction and the kinds of translation explicitly discussed. Results suggest that presenting students with only conventional symbolic representations of problems is likely to give a limited picture of their mathematical problem-solving abilities. It is possible to understand students' difficulties in translating among symbolic representations by systematically varying the symbolic form of the problem and response. Data suggest that the symbolic form of the response required plays a critical role in determining performance. Using alternative symbolic forms may be a good way to measure students' conceptual understanding of mathematics. The kinds of translation covered in instruction did not seem to play a major role in this study. Two tables present study data, and a 20-item list of references is included. (SLD)

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TRANSLATION BETWEEN SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATIONS: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INSTRUCTION AND PERFORMANCE

CSE TECHNICAL REPORT 329

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Noreen M. Webb, Karen Gold, and Sen Qi

University of California, Los Angeles

February, 1990

Mathematical Problem-Solving Processes and Performance:
Translation among Symbolic Representations

Researchers in mathematics and mathematics education and cognitive psychologists have long recognized that a very important, if not essential, component of successful problem-solving is the ability to translate between different symbolic representations of information (e.g., Clement, Lochhead, & Monk, 1980; Hooper, 1981; Janvier, 1987; Kaput, 1987; Lesh, Post, & Behr, 1987; Lesh, Landau, & Hamilton, 1983; Nesher, 1982; Shavelson, 1981; Shavelson & Salomon, 1985; Silver, 1985). Problem-solving often involves translating from the symbolic representation of the problem as given (typically words and numbers) to another symbolic form that more readily leads to a solution (e.g., diagram, graph, picture, algebra, words, or some combination of these). Yet, as has been demonstrated in some well-known studies, students at all ages have difficulty translating from one representation to another (e.g., Clement et al, 1980; Galvin & Bel, 1977; Nesher, 1979; Paige & Simon, 1966).

Although researchers and theorists recognize the importance of being able to translate among symbolic representations, we have only a limited understanding about the exact nature of students' abilities and difficulties in making translations. Furthermore, we know little about the extent to which their

patterns of performance are linked to the symbolic representations and kinds of translation used in instruction.

The main issue addressed here is that students have rarely been asked to solve problems on the same topic that systematically vary the symbolic representation of both the problem as given and the response that is required. Only a systematically varied set of problems can reveal the skills students have in dealing with different kinds of translation. That is, a comprehensive set of problems is needed to know whether it is possible to generalize students' skills in translation from one problem type to another. Furthermore, students' ability to translate across symbolic forms cannot be separated from the effects of instruction. If students can perform translations that are routinely practiced during instruction but have difficulty performing translations that are not covered in instruction, differences in performance would be attributable to instruction, not to inherent difficulties in certain kinds of translation. Systematically investigating the relationship between the kinds of translation used in instruction and students' problem-solving processes and performance is an important first step in clarifying the role of instruction.

The study reported in this paper was designed to address the issues just described. It collected information about students' performance on problems varying in symbolic form and the kinds of symbolic representations and translation used in

instruction. Particular attention was paid to the symbolic form of the response required as well as that of the problem given. In a previous study (Shavelson, Webb, Shemesh, & Yang, 1987), the symbolic form of the response required influenced students' problem-solving processes and performance more than did the form of the problem given. In particular, students applied the same numerical or algebraic algorithm whenever the response required was numerical, regardless of the form of the problem as given, but the response required (numerical or verbal description) markedly influenced how students solved the problem. The present study, then, used a greater variety of symbolic forms of the response required (graph, picture, number, algebra, words).

Method

Sample. The sample consisted of 29 students enrolled in an Algebra II class in an eight-week summer instructional program for minority students. All students were Black or Hispanic and most were about to enter grade 11.

Materials. For two topic areas, solving simultaneous equations in two unknowns and distance-rate-time relationships, sets of problems were developed that varied the symbolic form of the problem as given (words in a story problem, graph, diagram, algebra) and of the response required (words, graph, diagram, algebra). All other aspects of the problems (e.g., context, numbers used, complexity of the equations) were controlled to make the problems as parallel as possible except for symbolic form. Approximately half of the problems were open-ended; the

remaining problems were in multiple choice form to shorten the time necessary to solve them. Even for problems in multiple choice form, however, students were encouraged to explain their reasons for selecting their responses.

Data on teacher instructional methods came from the printed materials the teacher used, students' notes during the classes, and interviews of the teacher. This information was analyzed to determine the variety of symbolic forms used in instruction and kinds of translation explicitly discussed.

Results

The analyses presented here focus on problems that concern the same topic but vary either the symbolic form of the problem as given, the symbolic form of the response required, or both. The two topics are solving two equations with two unknowns and issues related to distance-rate-time.

Solving Two Equations With Two Unknowns

Four problems on the individual test concerning solving two equations with two unknowns varied both the symbolic form of the problem as given (word problem vs. algebraic equations) and the symbolic form of the response required (numerical vs. verbal). Problem 1 was a traditional word problem requiring a numerical response; problem 2 presented two equations for students to solve; problem 3 presented a word problem and asked students to explain, without solving the problem, why two particular erroneous solutions were incorrect; and problem 4 presented two

algebraic equations and asked students to select the word problem that was best described by the equations (see Figures 1 to 4).

Students' responses to these problems were scored in two ways: presence of conceptual and procedural errors. Examples of conceptual errors included setting up the equations incorrectly (problem 1), trying to substitute one equation into itself (problem 2), insisting that erroneous solutions to a word problem were correct (problem 3), and selecting a word problem that did not correspond to the equations (problem 4). Procedural errors consisted of arithmetic mistakes, such as incorrectly multiplying an equation by a constant (particularly negative constants). Initially, students' responses were scored according to the severity and frequency of errors. However, because the results were nearly identical to those scoring only the presence vs. absence of a conceptual or procedural error, the latter scoring is presented here for parsimony. A score of 1 indicates no error; a score of 0 indicates an error.

Individual performance. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for conceptual understanding scores for the four problems. The data were analyzed using a two-way repeated measures analysis of variance (symbolic form of problem as given vs. symbolic form of response required). As the results in Table 1 suggest, there was no main effect for either the symbolic form of the problem as given ($F(1, 17) = 0.49$, n.s.) or the symbolic form of the response required ($F(1, 17) = 0.49$,

n.s.). The interaction between the two factors, however, was significant ($F(1, 17) = 11.33$, $p < .005$). Student performance was highest when the symbolic form of the problem as given corresponded to that of the response required (word problem --> words; algebraic --> numerical). Student performance was significantly worse when the symbolic form of the problem as given did not correspond as closely to the symbolic form of the response required (word problem --> numerical; algebraic --> word problem). These results suggest that translation from one symbolic form to another (from problem as given to response required) added a degree of difficulty that was not found in the other problems.

To examine whether individual performance was consistent across problems, pairwise correlations were computed. None of the correlations were statistically significant. This result shows that individual students varied in their ability to translate across symbolic forms. For example, even though mean performance was similar for items 1 and 4, individuals who did well on item 1 (word problem --> numerical response) were not necessarily the same as those who did well on item 4 (algebraic equations --> word problem). The same interpretation applies to items 2 (algebraic equations --> numerical response) and 3 (word problem -->words). Ability to perform one kind of translation does not predict students' ability to perform another kind of translation.

Data about performance on procedural aspects of the problems (arithmetic skills) are presented in Table 1. (Item 4 did not measure procedural skills and so is not included here.) A one-way repeated analysis of variance showed no significant differences between mean procedural scores ($F(2,34) = 0.43$, $p < .66$). Students' tendencies to make arithmetic errors did not depend on the kind of translation between symbolic forms required by the problem. Furthermore, at least on one pair of problems (1 and 2), the correlation for procedural performance was statistically significant ($r = .61$, $p < .005$). This suggests that, for these two problems, an individual student's procedural performance was consistent. In all, the results show more consistency of performance across problems for procedural skills than for conceptual understanding. If one is interested in measuring procedural skills, the type of problem given students to solve is less critical than it is for measuring conceptual understanding.

To measure students' consistency of conceptual understanding and procedural skills, correlations were computed between conceptual and procedural performance for each item. Only for one item (2) was the correlation statistically significant ($r = .38$, $p < .05$), suggesting that students' conceptual understanding and procedural skills are largely uncorrelated.

Relationship between student performance and instruction. The interpretation given of the findings in Table 1 is that translation between different symbolic forms makes problems more difficult for students than translation between symbolic forms that closely correspond. An alternative explanation is that the performance shown in Table 1 might be a reflection of instructional experience, rather than due to inherent difficulties with translation per se, with the higher performance corresponding to kinds of translation between symbolic forms that were covered and practiced extensively in the class and the lower performance corresponding to kinds of translation that were not covered or practiced in the class. To test such an interpretation, information about students' instructional experiences was collected from various sources: course syllabi, handouts, quizzes, tests, homework assignments, reading materials, students' notes taken throughout the course, and interviews with the instructor. Analysis of the materials indicated that instructional experience did not account for the results reported in Table 1. Students had considerable practice with all types of problems with the exception of problem 3 (explaining why erroneous solutions to a word problem were incorrect). Yet performance on problem 3 was near the best among the four problems. Students had the most practice solving word problems (translating between verbal presentation and numerical response) and generating word problems that corresponded to pairs of equations (translating between algebraic equations and

verbal descriptions), and yet showed the worst performance on problems of these types.

Distance-Rate-Time Relationships

Two kinds of problems concerning distance-rate-time relationships appeared on the test: problems assessing whether students knew and could apply the formula D=RT (distance = rate x time) as well as substitute the correct values into the formula, and problems assessing their understanding of relative speed from graphs of time vs. speed. Each problem type is considered in turn.

Application of D=RT formula. Three problems on the test measured students' ability to apply the formula D=RT (see Figures 5 to 7). Problem 5 posed a simple word problem for students to solve. Problem 6 presented a graph of time vs. speed and problem 7 posed a similar problem as a word problem; both problems asked students to select the correct numerical expression for the distance traveled. Problems 6 and 7 were designed to be as comparable as possible to test the effects of the symbolic form of the information given (graph vs. verbal description). As was the case for the problems involving solving two equations with two unknowns, scoring for severity of errors and scoring merely for the occurrence of errors produced nearly the same results, so the results of the latter scoring method are presented here for parsimony. The problems were scored in two ways: (1) a score of 1 was given if students gave or selected the correct relationship among variables (D=RT) and a

score of 0 was given for giving or selecting the wrong relationship (D=T/R), and (2) a score of 1 was given if students selected the correct times and speeds and a score of 0 was given otherwise.

Student performance on the three D=RT problems is given in Table 2. A one-way repeated measures analysis of variance of the scores for applications of the D=RT formula was significant ($F(2,34) = 6.18$, $p < .006$). Further analyses showed that the difference between items 6 and 7 was not significant. This result suggests that the symbolic form of the problem as given (graph vs. word problem) had little effect on mean performance, possibly because the response required (numerical expression) was the same in both cases. Interestingly, however, the correlation between problems was not significant ($r = .06$), showing that students who could correctly select the D=RT relationship for one problem could not necessarily do so on the other problem.

The superior performance of students on problem 5 suggests that students' ability to apply the D=RT relationship on a simple one-step problem does not imply that students will be able to apply the relationship in a multiple-step problem.

Students' performance on these three problems on their ability to select the correct numbers for rate and time is also given in Table 2. A one-way repeated measures analysis of variance was not significant ($F(2, 34) = 2.53$, $p < .10$). Furthermore, the correlation between problems 6 and 7 was

significant ($r = .54$, $p < .01$). (Correlations with problem 5 could not be calculated due to lack of variance for that problem.) These results suggest that students' ability to select the correct numbers for rate and time were consistent across these problems and did not depend on the symbolic form of the problem as given nor on whether the problem was one-step or multi-step.

Understanding speed from graphs. Figures 8 to 11 give the four problems that assessed students' understanding of speed from graphs of time vs. speed. The direction of translation in the four problems were the following: graph to words in problem 8, picture to graph in problem 9, words to graph in problem 10, and graph to picture in problem 11. Performance on these problems (on a 0 vs. 1 scale as for the previous items) appears in Table 2. A one-way repeated measures analysis of variance was significant ($F(3, 57) = 9.75$, $p < .001$). Post hoc comparisons revealed that problem 8 was significantly easier than the other problems, and that problems 9 and 11 were significantly different.

In comparing the performance of students across these problems, it is reasonable to suspect that problem 8 was easier than the rest due to the following: (1) it involved car traveling on roads rather than biking uphill and downhill, and (2) it involved only two nonzero speeds. Nonetheless, we still believe that student performance would have been good had those other features been introduced. If so, then translating from a

graph into words was the easiest task for students. (Of course, this problem should be revised in future studies to make it more comparable to the others.) Similarly, problem 11 may have been more difficult than the others due to the lack of a "stop", rather than because of the particular direction of translation (graph to picture). Even with these qualifications, the difference in performance suggests that some directions of translation are easier than others.

All of the correlations among problems 9, 10, and 11 were statistically significant (ranging from .42 to .65, $p < .03$ to $p < .002$). The correlations with problem 8 were not significant due to the lack of variability in performance on this problem (all students except one got it right.) These results suggest that the order of difficulty of the kinds of translation was consistent across students.

Relationship between performance and instruction. Analysis of the course materials and interviewing the instructor revealed that students had practice with all of these types of problems. In fact, for translating between graphs and other representations, students worked on problems that were considerably more complex than those used in the current study. So, differences in performance on these problems were probably not due to differential exposure to them in the course.

Discussion

This study has several implications for research and practice in mathematics education and testing. First, presenting students with only conventional symbolic representations of problems (typically, numerical, algebraic, or story problems requiring numerical answers) is likely to give a limited picture of students' mathematical problem-solving abilities. Students can memorize algorithms for clearly identified problem types presented in conventional ways (see, for example, Mayer, 1981) and yet be unable to solve problems involving the same concepts but presented in different symbolic forms.

Second, it is possible to understand students' difficulties in translating among symbolic representations by systematically varying the symbolic form of problem and response required. Such a test or measure can have important diagnostic value in the classroom. The data presented here suggest that the symbolic form of the response required plays a critical role in determining performance, yet this feature of problems is rarely recognized as an important source of variation in performance.

A third, related, point is that using alternative symbolic forms of the response required may be a good way to measure students' conceptual understanding of mathematics. Problems requiring numerical responses typically involve procedural skills as well as conceptual understanding. It is often difficult to disentangle the two, particularly on tests with multiple-choice response formats. Asking students to think

through a problem requiring a different (non-numerical) representation may yield less ambiguous information about what students do and do not understand.

Fourth, the kinds of translation between symbolic forms covered during instruction did not seem to play a major role in this study. Students had practice with virtually all of the kinds of translation in the problems presented on the test, yet their performance differed markedly across different problems. It is possible that differences in performance across problems would have been accentuated still further if the instructor had covered fewer kinds of translation. To examine the role of instruction systematically, future studies should compare performance for instruction varying in kinds of translation covered.

A final word should be said about the limitations of this study and the implications for the design of future studies. The instructional program examined in this study was a special one--a summer course for promising minority students in mathematics. The students who participated in the course had been identified by previous teachers as having potential for learning mathematics and science. Furthermore, the instructors in the summer program are specially selected and have deep commitments to teaching and to mathematics and science. As was stated above, the features of this program may have influenced the results. Future studies should examine a range of students populations and instructional settings, with larger samples, to

determine the impact of these variables on students' ability to solve mathematical problems presented in different symbolic forms and requiring responses in different symbolic forms.

Acknowledgement

The research reported here was supported in part by grants from OERI (to the Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing) and the National Science Foundation.

We would like to thank Linda Robertson, Russell Wada, and John Novak for their assistance in this study.

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Table 1

Performance on Problems Involving Two Equations and Two Unknowns

Symbolic Form of Problem as Given	Symbolic Form of Response Required			
	Numerical		Words	
	M	SD	M	SD
	CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING			
Words	0.56	0.51	0.75	0.44
Algebraic Equations	0.86	0.36	0.52	0.51
	ARITHMETIC SKILLS			
Words	0.83	0.38	0.75	0.44
Algebraic Equations	0.71	0.46	N.A.	N.A.

Note: Words --> Numerical = Problem 1 (Figure 1)
Algebraic Equations --> Numerical = Problem 2 (Figure 2)
Words --> Words = Problem 3 (Figure 3)
Algebraic Equations --> Words = Problem 4 (Figure 4)

Table 2

Performance on Problems Involving Distance-Rate-Time Relationships

Problem	M	SD
APPLICATION OF D=RT FORMULA		
5 (One-step word problem)	1.00	0.00
6 (Graph --> Numerical (multi-step))	0.71	0.46
7 (Words --> Numerical (multi-step))	0.56	0.51
NUMERICAL SUBSTITUTION INTO D=RT FORMULA		
5 (One-step word problem)	1.00	0.00
6 (Graph --> Numerical (multi-step))	0.81	0.40
7 (Words --> Numerical (multi-step))	0.94	0.24
TIME VS. SPEED RELATIONSHIP FROM GRAPH		
8 (Graph --> Words)	0.95	0.22
9 (Picture --> Graph)	0.62	0.50
10 (Words --> Graph)	0.50	0.51
11 (Graph --> Picture)	0.38	0.50